

Push mounted to add black legislative seats

Caucus to study options for remap

By Ed Anderson

Capital bureau

TP MAR - 4 2011

BATON ROUGE — The state's Legislative Black Caucus has hired a consultant to help evaluate whether a second African American-majority congressional district can be drawn at the upcoming special legislative session, the chairwoman of the group said Thursday.

Rep. Patricia Smith, D-Baton Rouge, said Tony Fairfax of the Maryland-based Census Channel will be in the state to start reviewing Census figures and other data to see if a second minority district can be drawn.

The consultant also will look at where new majority-minority statehouse districts can be drawn, possibly in the Baton Rouge and Shreveport areas to offset the expected loss of three black-majority House seats and at least one minority Senate seat in the New Orleans area because of a loss of population after the 2005 hurricanes.

The state has one black-majority congressional district now, the seat held by 2nd District Rep. Cedric Richmond, D-New Orleans. Smith said the House has 27 minority districts but some of those seats are filled by non-African American lawmakers, while the Senate has 10 minority

seats and two of them are filled by non-African Americans.

Some non-African American occupants of minority seats, she said, may not be challenged based on their votes crucial to minority issues.

Smith said the caucus will see "if it is a friendly district (toward African-Americans) or a district that can be changed. Is it a person we think can assist us and work with us?"

Smith said she does not have a target number of new black-majority legislative seats in mind.

The Census put the state's minority population at 37 percent, including African Americans, Asians, American Indians and others, but does not include the 4.2 percent Hispanic population, state officials said.

Because the state's population did not keep pace with other areas of the nation, it will lose one congressional seat, going from seven to six. Smith said now is the time for minorities to try to pick up a second seat in the Louisiana congressional delegation.

But Richmond's district needs to pick up an additional 260,000 voters to meet federal requirements, a situation that could extend the boundaries from the current New Orleans and Jefferson Parish base to include new areas stretching along the Mississippi River to Baton Rouge, according to legislative officials.

The various plans for the new state House, Senate and congressional districts are expected to be aired publicly at a legislative hearing March 17 and 18

in Baton Rouge. Smith said she expects Fairfax to have the caucus plans ready for the hearings.

The special redistricting legislative session, called by lawmakers, will also deal with the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Public Service Commission, the state Supreme Court and the five circuit courts of appeal. The session opens March 20 and must end by 6 p.m. April 13.

During a daylong seminar on redistricting at the Southern University Law Center, sponsored by the law center, the Black Caucus and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's Legal Defense Fund, former congressman and state Sen. Cleo Fields of Baton Rouge, said that minorities should not be content with one minority seat in the state's congressional delegation.

"If you are going to create six congressional districts and it is possible to create a second majority-minority district, you should do that," Fields said.

James Gray, a New Orleans lawyer who has been involved in several lawsuits challenging the racial makeup of public bodies, said that "it may be possible to draw a second (minority congressional) district that will stand scrutiny, you should push and advocate for ... the need."

Ed Anderson can be reached at eanderson@timespicayune.com or 225.342.5810.